

# SNAKE EFFIGY TABLET FRAGMENTS FROM THE SQUIER AND DAVIS COLLECTION

by  
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For a century and a half, it's an image that has been reprinted in many books about Ohio Archaeology. Abstract, yet an immediately recognizable likeness, Squier and Davis' famous black line sketch of a coiled rattlesnake tablet from *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* is shown in Figure 1. It's a sketch that appears both noble and powerful in character—and one that cannot help but to invite curiosity about the object itself.

In *Ancient Monuments*, Squier and Davis relate that "several singularly shaped tablets" came from "one of the mounds, numbered 1 in the plan of great enclosure of North Fork of Paint Creek, (Plate X)" (see Figure 2). Squier and Davis also note that "It seems that several of these tablets were originally deposited in the mound; the greater portions of four have been recovered, but none displaying the head entire."

Of the four recovered tablets, they comment on the particular one that is represented in the black line drawing:

One of which the figure here presented is a copy, so far as it has been found possible to restore it from several fragments recovered. It represents a coiled rattlesnake; both faces of the tablet being identical in sculpture, excepting that one in plane, the other slightly convex.

Portions of two different rattlesnake tablets of the four collected by Squier and Davis, and now held by the British Museum, are shown in the Museum photographs (figures 3-7). Both of the tablets in these photographs have a similar overall

rounded rectangular shape to represent a coiled snake. They both have similar curved lines depicting the body and markings of the snake.

As can be seen in the photographs, one fragment (with the prominent rattle tail) is a fairly well preserved portion of the tablet represented in that well-known black line drawing.

This fragment, along with an assemblage of some additional damaged fragments of the same tablet (both labeled "S540") were also photographed by Barbara Harkness, Kent State University professor emeritus, when she studied the Squier and Davis collection at the British Museum in the 1980's. Placing two of Harkness's photographs next to one another, it can be seen how the black line drawing was likely conceived (Figures 8, 9 & 10).

Both the Museum's photographs and those of Harkness invite a close look at Squier and Davis's drawing and also at their comments on the rattlesnake artifacts. In *Ancient Monuments* Squier and Davis comment on the fragment's style and the size as follows:

the style of the sculpture is identical with that displayed in the tablet from Cincinnati mound already noticed. The original is six inches and a quarter long, one and three eighths broad, and one quarter of an inch thick. The workmanship is delicate, and the characteristic feature of the rattlesnake perfectly represented.

Squier and Davis describe the material as "very fine cinnamon-colored sand-

stone." Museum notes state that they are made of terra cotta. *Flint Chips*, the 1870 Blackmore Museum guidebook, describes the markings on the tablet fragments to be "stamped terra cotta."

Additionally, it may also be the case that some of the markings and imagery on this and the other tablets were painted. Squier and Davis note "a dark red pigment is yet plainly to be seen in the depressions of some of the fragments: others had been painted a dense black color."

The condition of the tablets is another subject of their remarks. They lament that of those tablets recovered none of the effigies' heads could be restored:

It is to be regretted that it is impossible to restore the head, which, so far as it can be made out, has some peculiar and interesting features, — plumes or ornamental figures surmounting it..

The disappointment of lost, damaged or destroyed artifacts seems a consistent theme in Ohio archaeology, even in these early days. Squier and Davis tell the following anecdote on how on one of the tablets was found and then broken by a local resident:

Previous to the investigation of the mound by the authors, an entire tablet was obtained from it by an individual residing near the spot, who represents it to have been carefully and closely enveloped in sheets of copper, which he had great difficulty in removing. Incited by a miserable curiosity he broke the specimen to

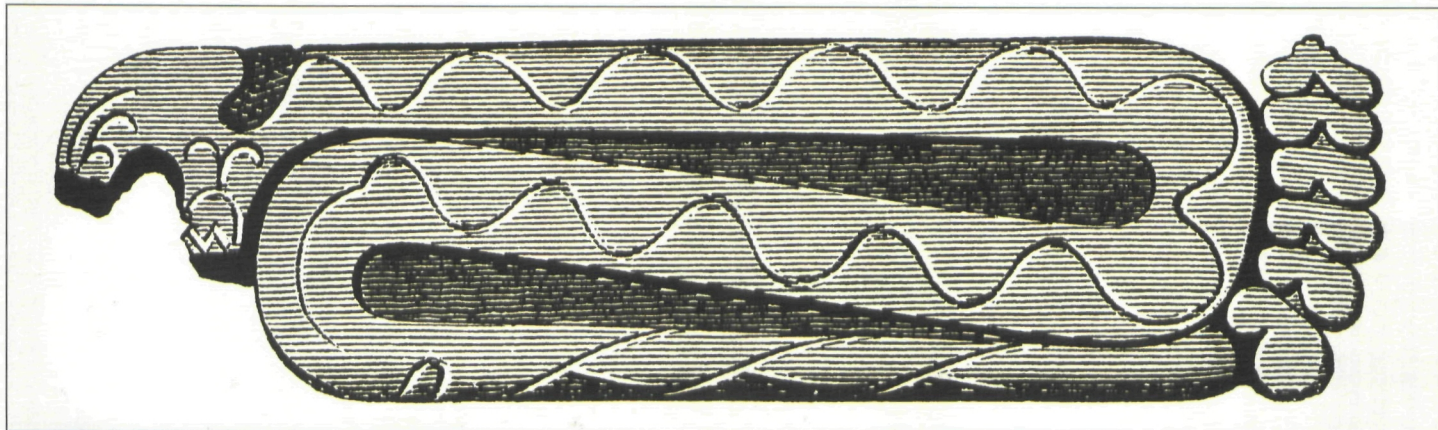


Figure 1 (Rusnak) Drawing of rattlesnake artifact from Squier and Davis *Ancient Monuments*.



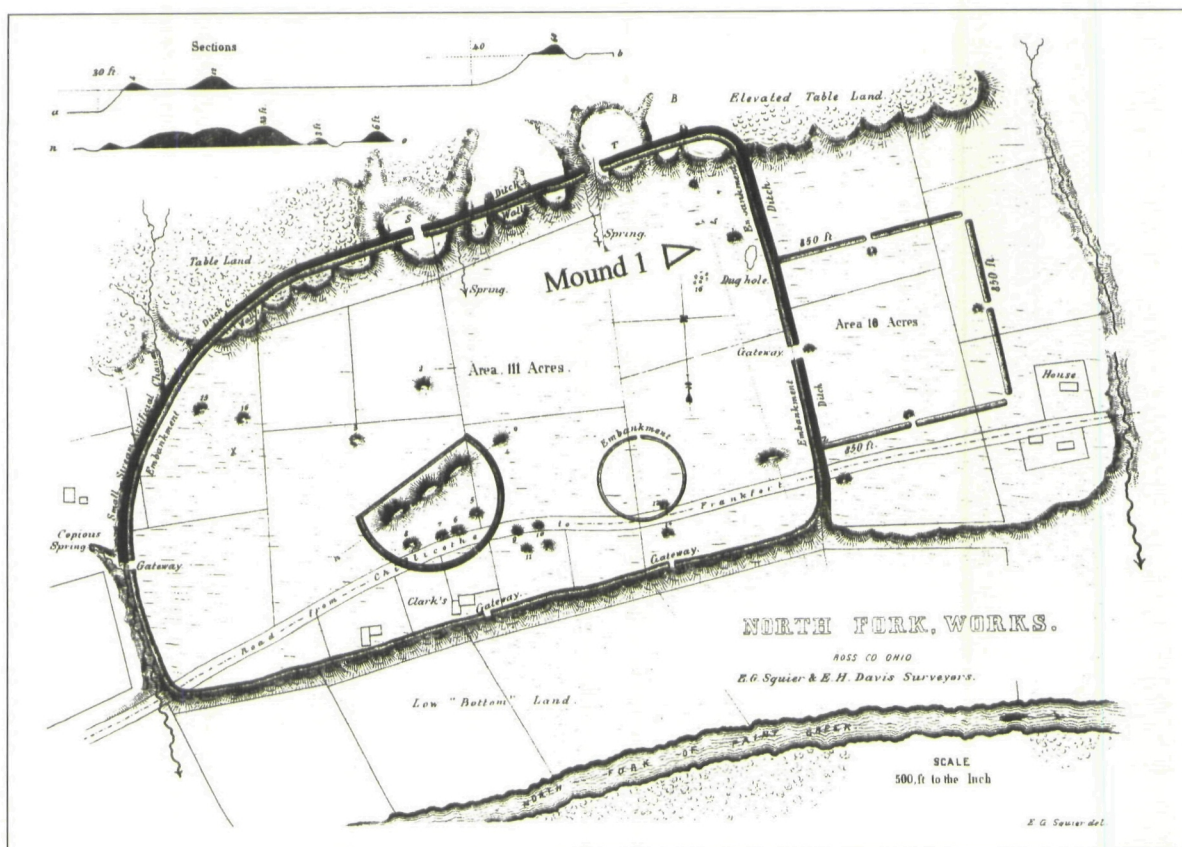


Figure 2 (Rusnak) Plate X from *Ancient Monuments*. Rattlesnake tablets were found in Mound 1.

ascertain its composition; and the larger portion, including the head, was subsequently lost

The number of snake images that appear during the Woodland Period in Ohio and elsewhere suggest something of the importance of the image. These include serpent mound, the mica snake from Turner, on some Hopewell effigy pipes, and abstract snake images also appear on some shell gorgets. These rattlesnake effigies tablets, though fragmented and damaged, still retain and convey something of the abstract style and the noble character in conception.

Much thanks to Barb Harkness for allowing *Ohio Archaeologist* to use her photographs (tan background) of this famous artifact. The photographs with the black background in this article are copyright of the Trustees of the British Museum, and are used under their terms and conditions. Much thanks also to the Museum for making them available to *Ohio Archaeologist*. These and other photos of Ohio artifacts from the Squier and Davis Collection are available to view in the research section of their website [www. http://www.britishmuseum.org/](http://www.britishmuseum.org/)



Figure 3 (Rusnak) British Museum photographs of fragments of two of four rattlesnake tablets in the Squier and Davis collection.





Figures 4-5 (Rusnak) Obverse and reverse of fragment.



Figures 6-7 (Rusnak)  
Obverse and reverse  
of fragment.







Figures 8, 9 & 10: A group of three photographs taken by Dr. Barbara Harkness in the 1980's.

The rattle fragment is on the left, and the obverse and reverse of an assembly of other fragments are on the right. When placed side by side, the photos approximate the black line drawing of Squier and Davis.



## CHAPTER PRESIDENTS



ASO Chapter Presidents attending January 2010 chapter president meeting. From left to right: Frank Otto, Chuck Oliver, Tom Debolt, Bob Bright, John Mocic, Ken Sowards, John Barnhart, Brent Heath, John Lutz, George DeMuth, Don Casto.